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SANDERSON'S FIRST LAW

Introduction

I like magic systems. That's probably evident to those of you who have read my work. A solid, interesting and innovative system of magic in a book is something that really appeals to me. True, characters are what make a story narratively powerful—but magic is a large part of what makes the fantasy genre distinctive.

For a while now, I've been working on various theories regarding magic systems. There's a lot to consider here. As a writer, I want a system that is fun to write. As a reader, I want something that is something fun to read. As a storyteller, I want a setting element that is narratively sound and which offers room for mystery and discovery. A good magic system should both visually appealing and should work to enhance the mood of a story. It should facilitate the narrative, and provide a source of conflict.

I'd like to approach the concept of magic in several different essays, each detailing one of the 'laws' I've developed to explain what I think makes good magic systems. As always, these are just my thoughts. Though I call them laws, they're nothing more than simple guidelines that have worked for me. Just like it's sometimes good to violate rules of grammar, authors can violate my theories and still have good books. However, I do think that by following these, you can work to develop more potent and memorable magic in your books.

The Law

> **SANDERSON'S FIRST LAW OF MAGICS: AN AUTHOR'S ABILITY TO SOLVE CONFLICT WITH MAGIC IS DIRECTLY PROPORTIONAL TO HOW WELL THE READER UNDERSTANDS SAID MAGIC.**

When I applied to be on the programming of my very first Worldcon (following my sale of Elantris, but before the book was actually released) I saw that they were doing a "How does the magic work?" panel. I eagerly indicated that I'd very much like to be a part of it, and to my delight, the committee put me on it.

It was my very first panel at the convention. I arrived somewhat bleary-eyed after an extended flight from Utah to Boston, but managed to find my way up to the front of the room, notes prepared, ideas prepared, sharpened, and ready to be unsheathed. I sat on the end of the table, and so was the first to speak when the moderator asked "All right, let's begin with the simple question. How should magic work?"

I said something I took as a GIVEN. After all, I'd read it in Orson Scott Card's writing book (I highly recommend the chapter on magic) and had used it as a rule of thumb for some time. It was the thing that I assumed was the first law of magic systems.

"Well," I said. "Obviously magic has to have rules."

And every other person on the panel disagreed with me violently. "If you have lots of rules and boundaries for your magic," they explained, "then you lose your sense of wonder! Fantasy is all about wonder! You can't restrict yourself, or your imagination, by making your magic have rules!"

I was dumbfounded. Suddenly, I realized that most of the reading I'd done on the subject had been produced by a segment of the population who liked a particular kind of magic. However, there appeared to be another complete school of thought on the matter. I struggled to defend myself for the rest of the panel, and left thinking that everyone else there must have really weak magic systems in their books.

Then, I thought about it for a while. Can't someone have a good story that does things differently from the way I do it? Can't you have magic without explaining lots of rules and laws for their magic? Tolkien didn't really explain his magic.

Yet, if the stories don't have rules and laws for their magic, don't they risk Deus Ex Machina (contrived endings) in their books? From the beginnings of the fantasy genre, its biggest criticism has been that it has no consistency. John Campbell, one of the most influential and important editors in the history of science fiction, once argued:

> **THE MAJOR DISTINCTION BETWEEN FANTASY AND SCIENCE FICTION IS, SIMPLY, THAT SCIENCE FICTION USES ONE, OR A VERY, VERY FEW NEW POSTULATES, AND DEVELOPS THE RIGIDLY CONSISTENT LOGICAL CONSEQUENCES OF THESE LIMITED POSTULATES. FANTASY MAKES ITS RULES AS IT GOES ALONG . . . THE BASIC NATURE OF FANTASY IS "THE ONLY RULE IS, MAKE UP A NEW RULE ANY TIME YOU NEED ONE!" THE BASIC RULE OF SCIENCE FICTION IS "SET UP A BASIC PROPOSITION—THEN DEVELOP ITS CONSISTENT, LOGICAL CONSEQUENCES."**

I disagree with this soundly—but in Mr. Campbell's defense, fantasy has come a long way since the sixties (when he wrote that in Analog.) Fantasy doesn't have to be about stories where the authors simply make up whatever they need. Still, I think that it is a criticism we fantasy writers need to be aware of and wary regarding. If we simply let ourselves develop new rules every time our characters are in danger, we will end up creating fiction that is not only unfulfilling and unexciting, but just plain bad.

Soft Magic

And so I began to develop my first law as a way to include magic systems that don't follow very strict rules, but which also don't undermine their plots. Let me state my law again: An author's ability to solve conflict with magic is directly proportional to how well the reader understands said magic.

This leaves room for those who want to preserve the sense of wonder in their books. I see a continuum, or a scale, measuring how authors use their magic. On one side of the continuum, we have books where the magic is included in order to establish a sense of wonder and give the setting a fantastical feel. Books that focus on this use of magic tend to want to indicate that men are a small, small part of the eternal and mystical workings of the universe. This gives the reader a sense of tension as they're never certain what dangers—or wonders—the characters will encounter. Indeed, the characters themselves never truly know what can happen and what can't.

I call this a "Soft Magic" system, and it has a long, established tradition in fantasy. I would argue that Tolkien himself is on this side of the continuum. In his books, you rarely understand the capabilities of Wizards and their ilk. You, instead, spend your time identifying with the hobbits, who feel that they've been thrown into something much larger, and more dangerous, than themselves. By holding back laws and rules of magic, Tolkien makes us feel that this world is vast, and that there are unimaginable powers surging and moving beyond our sight.

However, there is something you have to understand about writing on this side of the continuum. The really good writers of soft magic systems very, very rarely use their magic to solve problems in their books. Magic creates problems, then people solve those problems on their own without much magic. (George R. R. Martin's "A Song of Fire and Ice" uses this paradigm quite effectively.)

There is a reason that Gandalf doesn't just fly Frodo to Mount Doom with magic, then let him drop the ring in. Narratively, that just doesn't work with the magic system. We don't know what it can do, and so if the writer uses it to solve a lot of problems, then the tension in the novel ends up feeling weak. The magic undermines the plot instead enhancing it.

So, if you want to write soft magic systems, I suggest you hold yourself to NOT letting your magic solve problems for your characters. If the characters try to use the magic, it shouldn't do what they expect it to—as the reader doesn't know what to expect either. Use the magic for visuals and for ambiance, but not for plot. (Unless it's there to screw up things for the characters. That's always okay.)

Hard Magic

On the other side of the continuum, we have hard magic. This is the side where the authors explicitly describes the rules of magic. This is done so that the reader can have the fun of feeling like they themselves are part of the magic, and so that the author can show clever twists and turns in the way the magic works. The magic itself is a character, and by showing off its laws and rules, the author is able to provide twists, worldbuilding, and characterization.

If the reader understands how the magic works, then you can use the magic (or, rather, the characters using the magic) to solve problems. In this case, it's not the magic mystically making everything better. Instead, it's the characters' wit and experience that solves the problems. Magic becomes another tool—and, like any other tool, its careful application can enhance the character and the plot.

I would place Isaac Asimov on this side of the continuum. It's a bit irregular of me to use a man who, from essays I've read, was generally disapproving of the fantasy genre. (Asimov argued that fantasy was about dumb people—men with swords—killing smart people in the form of wizards.)

However, I think Isaac's robot stories are a perfect example of a Hard Magic system. In his robot stories, Asimov outlines three distinct laws, then never adds any more and never violates those laws. From the interplay of those three laws, he gave us dozens of excellent stories and ideas.

Note that by calling something "Hard Magic" I'm not implying that it has to follow laws of science, or even that there have to be explanations of WHY people can use that magic. What is important is the reader's understanding of what the magic can DO. Take superheroes, for instance. You may be tempted to assume that superhero magic is a "Soft" magic system. After all, the powers are often ridiculous with reasons for existing that defy any kind of logic or science. (IE: "I got bit by a radioactive spider, then gained the powers of a spider!")

However, superhero systems are very much Hard Magic systems. Remember, we're looking at this as writers, not as scientists. Narratively, superhero magic tends to be rather specific and explicit. (Depending on the story.) We generally know exactly which powers Spider-man has and what they do. He 1) Can Sense danger 2) has superhuman strength and endurance 3) Can shoot webs from his hands and 4) Can cling to walls. While in the comics, he does sometimes gain other strange powers (making the system softer), he does generally stick to these abilities in the movies.

Therefore, we're not surprised when Spider-man shoots a web in a bad guy's face. We've established that he can do that, and it makes sense to us when he does it. It is narratively a Hard Magic system, rather than a Soft Magic system.

The Middle Ground

Most writers are somewhere in the middle between these two extremes. A good example of what I consider to be near the center point would be Rowling's Harry Potter books. Each of these books outlines various rules, laws, and ideas for the magic of the world. And, in that given book, those laws are rarely violated, and often they are important to the workings of the book's climax. However, if you look at the setting as a whole, you don't really ever understand the capabilities of magic. She adds new rules as she adds books, expanding the system, sometimes running into contradictions and conveniently forgetting abilities the characters had in previous novels. These lapses aren't important to the story, and each single book is generally cohesive.

I think she balances this rather well, actually. In specifics, her magic is hard. In the big picture, her magic is soft. That allows her to use magic as points of conflict resolution, yet maintain a strong sense of wonder in the novels.

I consider my own magic systems to be perhaps 80% hard, maybe a bit more. My own paradigm is to develop a complicated magic system which can be explained as simply as possible, but which has a lot of background and 'behind the scenes' rules. Many of these workings don't get explained in the books, particularly at the first. The characters have some good understanding of the magic, but they rarely understand its complete form. This is partially because I treat my magics like sciences, and I don't believe that we will ever completely understand all of the laws of science. Partially also, I do this so that I can have discoveries and revelations in the novels. I like mystery more than I like mysticism.

So, following this, we have my own Mistborn series. In them, I outline many rules of the magic, then offer up a few unexplained exceptions or inconsistencies which I proceed to explain in further books. The interplay of how the different laws of magic work is vital to understanding major plot points.

How To Use This

If you're a writer working on your fantasy magic systems, I suggest that you decide what kind of feel you want for your magic. Do you like the techno-magic like you find in my books, or in books by L.E. Modesitt Jr. and Melanie Rawn? Do you like the hybrids like you find in someone more like David Eddings or J.K. Rowling? Or, do you prefer your magic to be more vague and mysterious, like you see in Tolkien or the George R. R. Martin books? I like to read works by all of these authors, but when I write, I prefer to have rules, costs, and laws to work with in my magic, and that makes it more fun for me.

What is the most interesting to you when writing? What feel or mood seems the best match for the particular book you're working on? (I've done mostly hard magic, but my kid's series has a slightly softer—perhaps 50/50—magic system. I did this intentionally, both because of the wacky nature of the books, and because I wanted to enhance the feel of the character being thrown into a strange world he didn't understand.)

Resist the urge to use magic to solve problems unless you've already explained and shown that aspect of how the magic works. Don't give the heroes a new power whenever they need one, and be very careful about writing laws into your system just so that you can use them in a single particular situation. (This can make your magic seem flimsy and convenient, even if you HAVE outlined its abilities earlier.)

If you're writing a hard magic system, when your character run into a problem, ask yourself "How could the characters use what they already have and know to solve this conflict?" Then, make them use what they have, instead of giving them something more. This will make the story more interesting, force your characters to stretch, and provide more fun for the reader.

If you're writing a soft magic system, ask yourself "How can they solve this without magic?" or even better, "How can using the magic to TRY to solve the problem here really just make things worse." (An example of this: The fellowship relies on Gandalf to save them from the Balrog. Result: Gandalf is gone for the rest of that book.)

Most of all, experiment and find out what you enjoy, then make it work for you.

Brandon Sanderson

February, 2007

(This is the SECOND draft of this essay. It will likely still be revised, and probably has a ton of typos in it.)

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